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# MANLINESS IN ATONEMENT.

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כל נדרי

## SERMON

Delivered before the Congregation "Temple Sinai," New Orleans.

KOL-NIDRE EVE, 5652,

BY

RABBI MAX HELLER.



THE AMERICAN HEBREW PUBLISHING HOUSE,  
THE BLOCH PRINTING COMPANY,  
CINCINNATI — AND — CHICAGO.





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. ויהי ערב ויהי בקר יום אחד. "It was evening, it was morning, one day." Which is this one day? the Rabbis ask. (Bereshith Rabbah, Sec. 2.) It is the Day of Atonement, as the prophet Zachariah says (xiv. 7): וְהָיָה יוֹם אֶחָד הוּא יוֹדֵעַ: "And one day there shall be, *that* will be known unto the Lord, and it will be that in the evening time there shall be light."

"In the evening time there shall be light," that is the motto of this majestic day. It rehearses in the soul the sublime revelations of the first creative act. Void and emptiness have held undisputed sway; darkness and confusion have reigned supreme; over unsounded deeps the spirit of God was moving and brooding—it was all haze and mist, without aim, without order—when upon the boundless spaces, with all-conquering and irresistible force, there burst the floods of streaming light, chasing the fogs before them, dragging into the day the entire formless chaos, compelling cloud and water to separate, unveiling the skies in their beauty, disclosing the earth as the field for teeming life.

Is not this greatest day of the year the day also for a new birth of heavenly light? a יום אחד, a one unique day without an equal? How many a soul it finds in hopeless

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chaos and confusion! The sinner is like the surging sea that can never be at rest; "void and without form:" that is the verdict of his life; "darkness upon the face of the deep:" that describes the ignorance and dullness which keep a man from searching the depths of his moral self; "the spirit of God moving aimlessly over the surface of the waters," the noblest instincts vague, unexercised and uncertain, the wavering doubt, the half-hearted trust completing the entire scene of darkness, without form or purpose.

Oh, that in many souls a light of knowledge might dawn upon all the wrecks and mists! It may be a merciless light at first; it may shine, at first, upon no inviting scenes; a terrible clearness it may be, revealing hollowness, darkness, disorder; but if it shines on the shadows must flee, clouds must dissolve and, under a smiling sky, life will sprout anew with the vigor of freshness. Let there be light without, and let us speak plainly and clearly; let there be light from above, and let us understand the divine precept; light around us that we may know our duty, light within us that we may recognize our failings.

And again we ask of this day of light: What is thy message? What are thy demands? And again we turn to the book of books for answer and enlightenment. Our health-spring of wisdom is the book of Jonah, and the lesson, this time, is a lesson preached by example. The inhabitants of Nineveh were forgiven; they had the secret of true atonement; when the doom was announced by Jonah: "yet forty days and Nineveh will be overturned," they knew how to avert the just wrath of God, they knew how to repent and to atone until all their sins were forgotten in the sincerity of their return. We read that lesson on the Day of Atonement; evidently it is meant that we should take it to heart:



wherein, then, consisted the atonement of Nineveh, the mighty city? In these things, simply and solely (Jonah iii. 5): וַיֵּאֱמִינוּ אַנְשֵׁי נִינְוָה בֵּאלֹהִים וַיִּקְרְאוּ צוֹם וַיִּלְבְּשׁוּ שָׂקִים : מגדולם ועד קטנם . “And the men of Nineveh believed in God, and they called out a fast and they covered themselves with sackcloth from their great ones even to their small ones.” Each of these we mean to take up, one by one, and to see what they mean, not what they meant, but what they mean now, what they mean to you, to me, to all Israel for this day and for all coming days like it.

“The men of Nineveh believed,” or, if you will, “they trusted in God.” They believed and they trusted at the same time, the word conveys both; they believed that they were guilty, they trusted that God would pardon. This is no trifling circumstance. An unknown stranger cries out against a whole metropolis of people and the king descends from his throne to fast and sit in ashes. There is no investigation or examination; the prophet is asked for no credentials, there is no questioning, objecting, doubting; conviction of sin and guilt strikes into the heart at once like livid lightning.

My friends, if you ask me what it is to believe I commend you to a study of this scene, and I call your attention to this peculiar circumstance, that belief here, that confidence and hope were not the result of search and criticism.

Friends, especially young friends, you who would like to believe, you who confess that you envy the believing, you who have seen what peace and strength others enjoy who do believe, you who stand in the storms of life, staffless, wavering, tortured with doubt, behold in these words the essence of belief and learn from them that belief is not the mere conclusion from a process of reasoning, that the road to belief lies not through the winding paths of suspicion,

of ridicule, of sarcasm, of doubt; that belief is the sunlight of a trusting soul, vanquishing the noxious vapors of cowardly suspicion, rising to strength from the deep-rooted foundations of a manly soul. Faith is strength, distrust is weakness: belief means courage, doubt is often a mere cowardice; belief springs from purity, disbelief betrays a war in the conscience; belief is the spontaneous growth from inner harmony, disbelief is the sounding out of an inward discord.

Why do I trust my friend? Do I reason with myself and arrive at perfect confidence? Is my trust a conviction to be proven logically and tested by the reasoning of others? It is a feeling, there is a voice in my heart which bids me confide, it stirs warmly in my breast when I remember him; I feel safe with him, no uneasy fear plagues me when I yield my dearest possessions to his keeping, no secret suspicion holds me back as I give up to him my inmost soul-life. Can you trust a friend with your all and never fear? Then you are a man with a manly soul; then you can believe and be happy in faith; but never ask or yearn for belief with that restless, uneasy, questioning spirit, never satisfied, never done, that can not give itself up without some secret reservation of suspicion or of fear.

I ask you to believe and to trust as did these men of Nineveh. You are to believe nothing against reason, nothing that you can not harmonize with your understanding; but you are to believe that which you can believe,—with the soul of a man, trustingly and bravely. You are to remember that man is imperfect; you are to believe that a justice above beholds and knows our sins, the open and the hidden ones; you are to trust that the sinner is punished, that sin can not live on without *meeting* with its



final deserts; you are to believe that man has the power to master sin, to uproot it from his desires, to drive it from the door where it is crouching, and you are to trust that God is merciful to the returned sinner, that true repentance and honest resolve will lead to pardon and to a new-born heart.

Can I give you this belief? Did the prophet Jonah impart it to the people of Nineveh? No preacher can, the fieriest, the most overpowering masters of earnest speech, never did or could; out of the depths of your manhood it must come; if you have it not from the loving lips of a pious mother, if you gleaned it not from the reverent words of a faithful father, if you have not learned it in the great school of life, from the blows and buffets of fortune, out of the griefs and sorrows of dark hours, come not to weak men to ask it of them; it is not for friend or brother, for teacher or preacher to give; grow to it, fight for it against every unholy voice, feel it in its greatness: it will be yours like a weapon that you have forged in the fires of a furnace.

You see, these people of Nineveh had to believe; for what value otherwise would have resided in their second procedure when, it is said, ויקראו צום they proclaimed a fast? Certainly, you will say, no value whatever. Indeed, no value; but does not the heart of many a person in this congregation accuse him, nay, condemn him, even while this thought occurs to him? They believed and they fasted; that proved their belief was strong enough to grow into deed, their deed was alive and full of meaning, growing out of belief; belief and conduct were one and inseparable; no pretence without reality, no mere function without soul or thought. This is fasting when the heart is in it, when there is no dozing or yawning, no lookings at the clock or friendly

expressions of sympathy, no visiting of synagogues or conversing in vestibules, when the fasting is inspired with prayer and the prayer upborne by the fasting. הלא זה צום אבתרהו, this is the fasting which the Lord choosèd: that the body, for a time, should be forgotten; that we should leave off pampering tastes and desires, chasing after pleasures, calculating gain, anticipating and picturing enjoyments; that we should despise and deem of insignificant import the foolish whims, the little discomforts and rebellions of a surfeited animalism; that, with a majestic unfurling of heaven-seeking wings, the soul should soar like an eagle unto God and purity, to dwell in prayer and serious thoughts for an unbroken day of profound devotion. Then it is as if the soul had bathed in healing waters of piety, as if for a day we were higher beings, lifted above the cravings, the weaknesses, the slaveries that hang on the spirit like dragging chains.

But we must believe and fast; it will not do for us to be like the sailors in a previous chapter of this Jonah-story of whom it is said, "they feared the Lord very greatly and they offered a sacrifice unto the Lord." (Jonah i. 16.) God rules not by fear, and the sacrifices of a terrified spirit please him not; superstitious fasting is silly fasting; if you fast because you are afraid to disobey the custom, if you have no better reason for it than fear and terror, why then your fasting is an unholy idolatry. Believe and fast; or, if your soul is too small to believe, do not fast without belief, for it is manlier to be honest in disbelief than to be dishonest in belief; but if you believe not and fast not, which is honest, though it is not religious, do not forget that for a man not to believe can never be a legitimate reason for boasting or



self-gratulation. It is a misfortune; those who think it a distinction are only doubly blind.

We are further informed about the people in Nineveh by being told that יִלְבְּשׁוּ שָׂקִים they clothed themselves in sackcloth. That seems to teach us very little about our duty and behavior; for we live in a time in which an eccentricity of dress like covering with sackcloth would hardly reach any effect in the line of moral impression. In manners and habits we compare with these people as men would with children; the child expresses its feelings violently, in voice, gesture and action; the man is more reserved and measured even in his moments of deepest emotion; in the same way these people worshiped by literally throwing themselves into the dust before God, we rise or at the most bow down in our worship. Thus we can not be expected to go to the extent of sackcloth in our humility; but we can leave our vanity and our jewels at home; we can prevent our children from calling on us so as to disturb worship; we can dispense with bouquets and similar annoyances; and we can practice, on the Day of Atonement at least, a virtue which so many of our festivals preach to us, and preach to us alas! in vain: the virtue which the Matzo commends on the Passover, the virtue which Shevuoth suggests when we speak of Mount Sinai, humblest and yet greatest of mountains, the virtue of which the booth reminds us on the Succoth—the virtue of simplicity. Our forefathers were right, and they evinced fine tact and a thorough appreciation of the sacredness of these days when they were careful, in this week of repentance, to avoid displays of dress and jewelry. What a mockery on a day so holy, on a day when all the vanities of life are banished, and earnestness is enthroned sovereign! What a mockery on a day that strips the

covering of pretence from every sham, on a day that acknowledges no splendors but of purity, no adornments but of an humble spirit! What a mockery that on a day so terribly serious we should keep up the childish triflings, the frivolous whims on which we scatter and waste our time and talents! וילבשו שקים, they dressed in sackcloth, severe plainness in dress and manner ought to be the rule of this day; nothing should be encouraged that tends to divert thought from its sacred object; to dazzle the eyes of worshippers with showiness is to interfere with their devotion, is to turn the sanctuary into a show-window, the place of prayer into a bazar of fashion

Nor is this a lesson merely for the most sacred of days, but a warning for the year round; it is a reproach to the Jew that he enjoys in his wealth nothing so much as the chance of display; he must shine and dazzle, or else he is not happy; it is an immodesty and an arrogance that arouses envy and jealousy in some, that challenges the contempt and dislike of others. Untold harvests of hatred have sprung from this little seed of bad taste and lacking discretion. Not often enough, not urgently and imploringly enough can we preach to the Jew: be simple in habit and unassuming in manner! content thyself with the enjoyment of thy possessions, cease crying out thy merits on the streets, leave thy gold unburnished in the public view and unjingled in the pocket; thou art the preacher to the world that the life is of the soul, that happiness is of the conscience, that honor is in the fear of God; be not thou the ridicule of the sensible in standing before rational men as a living contradiction of thine own sermon and warning.

And when thou wilt have found thy dignity, O Israel, like any man who wearies of studying attitudes and soliciting



admiration, who concludes that he would rather be worthy and independent of the world's praises; when thou wilt rest upon the claims of a rounded manhood, awaiting in modest patience the approval of the discerning, then wilt thou glory also in another great good which comes with the self-respect of a well-balanced character, in the boon of true and thorough equality. וילבשו שקים, it is said, "they dressed themselves in sackcloth," מנהולם ועד קטנם "from the great ones down to the small ones." It has been one of Israel's great blessings, a blessing almost unrecognized and yet not least among the main pillars of our strength, that humility and degradation and suffering have bred equality in the very bone of the Jew, until all aristocratic airs as between Jew and Jew are ridiculous and intolerable. So uncertain have been the chances in those dark times which are only just over and not even for all Jews, so new has been the prominence or prosperity of the conspicuous that, through a training of ages, the Jew has become a democrat who will acknowledge no superior except by education or a higher calling. If to-day the worship of Mammon, if the importance and power which wealth gives to its possessor, if these threaten to disturb the balance, to stand like a wall between rich and poor, between fashionable and ragged between the pampered and the starved, we have such mighty voices as this Yom Kippur to call out to all: down into the dust of humility, one like the other, broadcloth and rags: אין אדם אשר לא יחטא (1 Kings viii. 46) not a man of you that has not sinned, you are all alike children unto the Lord your God; sinning children, embraced by his love, your small ones as your great ones. On a day like this humility ought to level us all into perfect equality, and, were it possible to carry out, were not human nature

such as it is, grasping with greedy hand each chance for selfish gain even on the holiest of days, I should think nothing a fitter observance than that on this day, at least, poor should mingle with rich, pew by pew and seat by seat, that for once we should throw open this gorgeous sanctuary to all alike, **מגדולם ועד קטנם** “to the small as well as to the great,” caring nothing for elegance of dress or manner, but welcoming all our brothers to one grand chorus of prayer and repentance.

No need to prove it, experience of many years has taught that it can not be done; that in the interest of dignified worship we have to control, to restrain; that all we can do is to invite the worthy among the poor, to make them welcome and at home among us; but beyond the walls of this temple, out into every walk and function of life the lesson is thundered forth: Thou great one and thou small one, you are brothers; before the Maker your life is as the yesterday when it has passed; stand bravely and lovingly one by the other; there may be a time when righteous men will have to stand in solid front; join hands in spirit on this majestic day, you are pledged the brother for the brother!

**ויהי ערב ויהי בקר יום אחד** It was evening, it was morning, one day: only when out of darkness and terror there dawns in the end a morning of brightness, then alone is the day complete; only when out of sin and suffering man has conquered purity, then is life complete and rounded; for the light there must be darkness to precede; out of despair is born the most heavenly joy; from defeat arises triumph, out of the struggle issues peace. **והיה לעת ערב ויהיה אור** “And it will be that in the evening time there shall be

light;" may our light be the light of the Lord that by His guidance we may resume His path **כִּי עֵינֶךָ מִקּוֹר חַיִּים בְּאוֹרְךָ** (Ps. xxxvi. 10.) "For with Thee is the fountain of life; in Thy light shall we see the light." Amen.









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